

Territorial States and the Rise of Magadha

Conditions for the Rise of Large States

From the sixth century BC onwards, the increasing use of iron in eastern UP and western Bihar created conditions for the formation of large territorial states. Armed with iron weapons, the warrior class now played an important role. The new agricultural tools and implements enabled the peasants to produce far more food grains than they required for consumption. The extra produce could be collected by the princes to meet their military and administrative needs. The surplus could also be made available to the towns that had sprung up in fifth century BC. These material advantages naturally enabled the people to remain on their land, and also to expand at the cost of the neighbouring areas. The rise of large states with towns as their base of operations strengthened the territorial idea. People owed strong allegiance to the *janapada* or the territory to which they belonged rather than to their *jana* or tribe.

The *Mahajanapadas*

We may recall that a few *janapadas* arose towards the end of the Vedic-period. However, with progress in agriculture and settlement by 500 BC, they became a common feature. Around 450 BC, over forty *janapadas* covering even Afghanistan and south-eastern Central Asia are mentioned by Panini. However, the major part of southern India was excluded. The Pali texts show that the *janapadas* grew into *mahajanapadas*, that is large states or countries. These texts

mention sixteen of them. Nine of them also occur in Panini not as *mahajanapadas* but as *janapadas*. In the age of the Buddha we find sixteen large states called *mahajanapadas*. Most of these states arose in the upper and mid-Gangetic plains, including the doab area covered by the Ganges, Yamuna, and their tributaries. They were mostly situated north of the Vindhya and extended from the north-west frontier to Bihar. Of these, Magadha, Koshala, Vatsa, and Avanti seem to have been powerful. Beginning from the east, we hear of the kingdom of Anga which covered the modern districts of Monghyr and Bhagalpur. It had its capital at Champa, which shows signs of habitation in the fifth century BC, and there is a mud fort dating to that century. Eventually the kingdom of Anga was swallowed by its powerful neighbour Magadha.

Magadha embraced the former districts of Patna, Gaya, and parts of Shahabad, and grew to be the leading state of the time. Its earlier capital was Rajgir, and later Pataliputra. Both were fortified, and show signs of habitation around the fifth century BC. North of the Ganges, in Tirhut division lay the state of the Vajjis which included eight clans. However, the most powerful dynasty was that of the Lichchhavis with their capital at Vaishali which is coterminous with the village of Basarh in Vaishali district. The Puranas push the antiquity of Vaishali to a much earlier period, but archaeologically Basarh was not settled until the sixth century BC.

Further west we find the kingdom of Kashi with its capital at Varanasi. Excavations at Rajghat show that the earliest habitations started around 500 BC, and the city was enclosed by mud embankments at about the same time. Initially Kashi appears to have been the most powerful of the states, but eventually it succumbed to the power of Koshala.

Koshala embraced the area occupied by eastern UP and had its capital at Shravasti, which is coterminous with Sahet–Mahet on the borders of Gonda and Bahraich districts of UP. Diggings indicate that Sahet–Mahet was barely settled in the sixth century BC, but we see the beginnings of a mud fort. Koshala had an important city called Ayodhya which is associated with the story in the *Ramayana*. Excavations however show that it was not settled on any scale before the fifth century BC. Koshala also included the tribal republican territory of the Shakyas of Kapilavastu. The capital of Kapilavastu is identified with Piprahwa in Basti district. Habitation at Piprahwa did not occur earlier than c. 500 BC. Lumbini, which is situated at a distance of 15 km from Piprahwa in Nepal, served as another capital of the Shakyas. In an Ashokan inscription, it is called the birthplace of Gautama Buddha.

In the neighbourhood of Koshala lay the republican clan of the Mallas, whose

territory touched the northern border of Vajji state. One of the capitals of the Mallas was at Kushinara where Gautama Buddha passed away. Kushinara is coterminous with Kasia in Deoria district.

Further west was the kingdom of the Vatsas, along the bank of the Yamuna, with its capital at Kaushambi near Allahabad. The Vatsas were a Kuru clan who had shifted from Hastinapur and settled at Kaushambi. Kaushambi was chosen because of its location near the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna. In the fifth century BC, it had a mud fortification, as excavations reveal.

We also hear of the older states of the Kurus and the Panchalas which were situated in western UP, but they no longer enjoyed the political significance they had attained in the later Vedic period.

In central Malwa and the adjoining parts of MP lay the state of Avanti. It was divided into two parts, the northern part with its capital at Ujjain, and the southern part at Mahishamati. Both these towns became fairly important from the fifth century BC onwards, though eventually Ujjain surpassed Mahishamati. It developed large-scale working in iron and erected strong fortifications.

The political history of India from the sixth century BC onwards was one of struggles among these states for supremacy. Eventually the kingdom of Magadha emerged as the most powerful and founded an empire. In the north-west, Gandhara and Kamboja were important *mahajanapadas*. Kamboja is called a *janapada* in Panini and a *mahajanapada* in the Pali texts. It was located in Central Asia in the Pamir area which largely covered modern Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, the remains of a horse, chariots and spoked wheels, cremation, and svastika, which are associated with the Indo-Aryan speakers dating to between 1500 and 1000 BC, have been found. Around 500 BC, both Sanskrit and Pali were spoken in Kamboja, which was connected with Pataliputra by the *uttarapatha*.

The Rise and Growth of the Magadhan Empire

Magadha came into prominence under the leadership of Bimbisara of the Haryanka dynasty and a contemporary of the Buddha. He began the policy of conquest and aggression which ended with the Kalinga war of Ashoka. Bimbisara acquired Anga and placed it under the viceroyalty of his son Ajatashatru at Champa. He also strengthened his position by marriage alliances. He had three wives. Bimbisara's first wife was the daughter of the king of Koshala and the sister of Prasenajit, the son and successor of the Koshalan king. The Koshalan bride brought Bimbisara as dowry a Kashi village yielding a

revenue of 100,000 which suggests that revenues were collected in terms of coins. The marriage bought off the hostility of Koshala and gave Bimbisara a free hand in dealing with the other states. His second wife, Chellana, was a Lichchhavi princess from Vaishali who gave birth to Ajatashatru, and his third wife was the daughter of the chief of the Madra clan of Punjab. Marriage relations with the different princely families lent enormous diplomatic prestige and paved the way for the expansion of Magadha westward and northward.

Magadha's most serious rival was Avanti with its capital at Ujjain. Its king, Chanda Pradyota Mahasena, fought Bimbisara, but eventually the two thought it wise to make up. Later, when Pradyota was afflicted by jaundice, at the Avanti king's request, Bimbisara sent the royal physician Jivaka to Ujjain. Bimbisara is also said to have received an embassy and a letter from the ruler of Gandhara with which Pradyota had fought unsuccessfully. Therefore, through his conquests and diplomacy, Bimbisara made Magadha the dominant state in the sixth century BC. His kingdom is said to have consisted of 80,000 villages, a number which sounds conventional.

The earliest capital of Magadha was at Rajgir, which was called Girivraja at that time. It was surrounded by five hills, the openings in which were closed by stone walls on all sides, which made it impregnable.

According to the Buddhist chronicles, Bimbisara ruled for fifty-two years, roughly from 544 to 492 BC. He was succeeded by his son Ajatashatru (492–60 BC). Ajatashatru killed his father and seized the throne for himself. His reign saw the high watermark of the Bimbisara dynasty. He fought two wars and made preparations for the third. Throughout his reign he pursued an aggressive policy of expansion. This provoked a combination of Kashi and Koshala against him. There began a prolonged conflict between Magadha and Koshala. Eventually Ajatashatru got the best of the war, and the Koshalan king was compelled to purchase peace by giving his daughter in marriage to Ajatashatru and leaving him in sole possession of Kashi.

Ajatashatru was no respecter of relations. Although his mother was a Lichchhavi princess, this did not prevent him from making war against Vaishali. The excuse was that the Lichchhavis were the allies of Koshala. He sowed dissension within the ranks of the Lichchhavis and eventually ended their independence by invading their territory and by defeating them in battle. This took him full sixteen years. He was eventually successful in doing so because of a war engine like a catapult which was used to hurl stones. He also possessed a chariot to which a mace was attached, and this facilitated mass killings. The Magadhan empire was thus enlarged with the addition of Kashi and Vaishali.

Ajatashatru faced a stronger rival in the ruler of Avanti. Avanti had defeated the Vatsas of Kaushambi and now threatened an invasion of Magadha. To meet this threat Ajatashatru began the fortification of Rajgir, the remains of the walls of which can still be seen. However, the invasion did not materialize during his lifetime.

Ajatashatru was succeeded by Udayin (460–44 BC). His reign is important because he is said to have built a fort at the confluence of the Ganges and Son at Patna. This was done because Patna lay at the centre of the Magadha kingdom, which now extended from the Himalayas in the north to the hills of Chhotanagpur in the south. Patna's position, as will be seen later, was crucially strategic.

Udayin was succeeded by the dynasty of Shishunagas, who temporarily moved the capital to Vaishali. Their greatest achievement was the destruction of the power of Avanti with its capital at Ujjain. This brought to an end the 100-year old rivalry between Magadha and Avanti. From now onwards Avanti became a part of the Magadha empire and continued to be so till the end of Maurya rule.

The Shishunagas were succeeded by the Nandas, who proved to be the most powerful rulers of Magadha. So great was their power that Alexander, who invaded Punjab at that time, dared not move towards the east. The Nandas extended the Magadha power by conquering Kalinga from where they brought an image of *jina* as a victory trophy. All this took place during the reign of Mahapadma Nanda. This ruler claimed to be *ekarat*, the sole sovereign who had destroyed all the other ruling princes. It seems that he captured not only Kalinga but also Koshala which had probably rebelled against him.

The Nandas were fabulously rich and enormously powerful. It is said that they maintained 200,000 infantry, 60,000 cavalry, and 3000 to 6000 war elephants. Such a huge army could be maintained only through an effective taxation system. Obviously these considerations prevented Alexander from advancing against the Nandas.

The later Nandas proved to be weak and unpopular. Their rule in Magadha was supplanted by that of the Maurya dynasty under which the Magadha empire reached the apex of glory.

Causes of Magadha's Success

The march of the Magadha empire during the two centuries preceding the rise

of the Mauryas is like the march of the Iranian empire during the same period. The formation of the largest state in India during this period was the work of several enterprising and ambitious rulers such as Bimbisara, Ajatashatru, and Mahapadma Nanda. They employed all the means in their power, fair and foul, to enlarge their kingdoms and to strengthen their states. This, however, was not the only reason for the expansion of Magadha.

There were some other important ones. Magadha enjoyed an advantageous geographical position in the age of iron, because the richest iron deposits were situated not far away from Rajgir, the earliest capital of Magadha. The ready availability of the rich iron ores in the neighbourhood enabled the Magadhan princes to equip themselves with effective weapons which were not easily available to their rivals. Iron mines are also located in eastern MP, and were not far from the kingdom of the Avanti with their capital at Ujjain. Around 500 BC, iron was certainly forged and smelted in Ujjain, and probably the smiths manufactured weapons of good quality. On account of this Avanti proved to be Magadha's most serious competitor for supremacy in north India, and Magadha took about a hundred years to subjugate Ujjain.

Magadha enjoyed certain other advantages. The two capitals of Magadha, the first at Rajgir and the second at Pataliputra, were situated at very strategic points. Rajgir was surrounded by a group of five hills, and so it was impregnable in those days when there was no easy means of storming citadels such as cannons. In the fifth century BC, the Magadhan princes shifted their capital from Rajgir to Pataliputra, which occupied a pivotal position commanding communications on all sides. Pataliputra was situated at the confluence of the Ganges, the Gandak, and the Son, and a fourth river called the Ghaghra joined the Ganges not far from Pataliputra. In preindustrial days, when communications were difficult, the army could move north, west, south, and east by following the courses of the rivers. Also, the position of Patna itself was rendered invulnerable because it was virtually surrounded by rivers. While the Ganges and the Son girdled it on the north and west, the Poonpun girdled it on the south and east. Pataliputra was therefore a true water fort (*jaladurga*).

Magadha lay at the centre of the mid-Gangetic plains, the Ganges providing a means of both transport and agricultural facilities. As most of the *mahajanapadas* were located in the Gangetic plains, they could be reached by navigating the rivers. There was also an abundance of timber as can be seen in the palisades of the sixth century BC found south of Patna. Megasthenes speaks of the wooden walls and houses in Pataliputra. Thus boats could be easily manufactured and they played an important part in promoting the advance of

Magadha towards the east and the west. Similarly, environmental factors conducive to agriculture helped Magadha. The alluvium, once cleared of jungles, proved immensely fertile. Given the heavy rainfall, the area could be made productive even without irrigation. The countryside produced varieties of paddy, which are mentioned in the early Buddhist texts. This area was far more productive than the areas to the west of Allahabad. This naturally enabled the peasants to produce a considerable surplus, which could be mopped up by the rulers in the form of taxes.

The princes of Magadha also benefited from the rise of towns and use of metal money. A Pali text speaks of twenty towns in the age of the Buddha. Most of them were located in the mid-Gangetic plains. They contributed to trade and commerce in north-east India. This enabled the princes to levy tolls on the sale of commodities and accumulate wealth to pay and maintain their army.

Magadha enjoyed a special advantage in military organization. Although the Indian states were well acquainted with the use of horses and chariots, it was Magadha which first used elephants on a large scale in its wars against its neighbours. The eastern part of the country could supply elephants to the princes of Magadha, and we learn from Greek sources that the Nandas maintained 6000 elephants. Elephants could be used to storm fortresses and to march across marshy and other areas lacking roads and other means of transport.

Finally, we may refer to the unorthodox character of Magadhan society. It was inhabited by the Kiratas and Magadhas, who were held in low esteem by the orthodox brahmanas. It however underwent a happy ethnic admixture with the coming of the Vedic people. As it had been recently Vedicized, it demonstrated a greater enthusiasm for expansion than the kingdoms that had been brought under the Vedic influence earlier. For all these reasons, Magadha succeeded in defeating the other kingdoms and in founding the first empire in India.

Chronology

(BC)

6 C	Basarh (Vaishali) was not settled.
6 C onwards	Struggles among large states (<i>mahajanapadas</i>).
544–492	Bimbisara ruled Magadha.
500	Habitation at Piprahwa, capital of Kapilavastu, not earlier than this date.
5 C	Champa evidences habitation and a mud fort.

Kaushambi also had a mud fortification. Surplus food grains available to towns on the basis of iron tool agriculture.

492–60

Ajatashatru's rule in Magadha.

460–44

Udayin's reign in Magadha. The fort on the confluence of the Ganges and the Son built by him.